

STATE/REGION

U.S. jobs in the forefront as Simmons visits Asnuntuck

By Tom Breen

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ENFIELD — American jobs have to be prevented from going overseas, but not at the cost of making the U.S. economy less productive, according to a Republican congressman and a Bush administration official who were here Wednesday for a job forum.

U.S. Rep. Robert R. Simmons, R-2nd District, and Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Grant Aldonas visited Asnuntuck Community College to discuss the creation of long-term manufacturing jobs in America.

Asnuntuck was chosen for the forum because of its Machine Technology Center, which trains students who range in age from their teens to their 60s to become proficient on high-tech manufacturing equipment. Simmons said he's seeking \$2.8 million in federal funds for the center.

Wednesday's discussion included

the concerns of many in attendance that international trade and globalization are taking jobs away from America while simultaneously driving down the wages and benefits of the jobs that remain behind.

Some of the concern was sparked by recent statements from members of President George W. Bush's administration that "outsourcing" or "offshoring" jobs — sending them overseas — can be beneficial to the economy.

Treasury Secretary John Snow, for example, told the Cincinnati Enquirer last month that sending jobs overseas can make the American economy stronger.

"It's one aspect of trade, and there can't be any doubt about the fact that trade makes the economy stronger," he said.

Simmons, who voted against authorizing Bush to negotiate trade agreements using so-called "fast track" powers and who describes himself as a "fair trader" rather than a "free trader," said the question

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isn't as simple as it appears.

Simmons said a significant number of jobs in Connecticut come from "insourcing," or winning them from foreign countries. He pointed to Enfield's Lego Building Corp. as an example of a foreign company

choosing to do business in the United States.

"We're working to prevent people from losing their jobs overseas, but we have to be smart about how we do it," he said.

One way that can be done, Simmons said, is by the administration getting serious about requiring other countries, such as China, to follow international trade law.

In the past, he said, the U.S. has been too lenient in making sure other countries follow the rules, giving them an unfair advantage when it comes to competing for jobs.

Aldonas was more positive about outsourcing, saying it works in America's favor if conducted on a level playing field.

"I don't want to lose sight of the real issue," he said, mentioning testimony he's heard from manufacturers who say they are shedding jobs but are short-handed because few workers have the necessary skills.

"The real issue is how you match skills with where the economy is going," he said.

Aldonas also detailed the administration's blueprint for increasing the number of U.S. manufacturing jobs, including lower taxes, low health insurance costs, and change in liability law that make manufacturers less vulnerable to lawsuits.

But some fear that competitiveness comes with a price. At the forum, Town Manager Scott Shanley noted that while the United States has a competitive economy, no one in the country wants American wages to match those in China or Indonesia.

Simmons agreed, saying that when the labor cost in America is factored in with the value of capital assets and the product produced, wages in America are a small cost of the operation.

"We don't want to reduce our wages, our health benefits, our environmental standards, to be competitive with the Chinese," he said.